

A&M vets: pioneers in their fields

By MICHAEL CANNATA
Reporter

With a dead snake under one arm and a jug of wine under the other, a veterinarian in 1684 was no more than a glorified witch doctor. Three hundred years later, Texas A&M veterinarians are pioneers in the medical profession, experimenting with theories that one day may become standard in human medicine.

About a tenth of all veterinarians in the United States come from the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine, one of the 10 original veterinary colleges and the largest in the country.

Today the college, located west of the main campus on Farm Road 60, graduates a class of 138 each year with Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degrees. A total of 4,031 veterinarians have graduated from Texas A&M. More than 550 students are in the curriculum at the moment.

Dr. George Shelton, dean of the college for 11 years, has seen the college strengthen its teaching programs. Despite a reduced national interest in veterinary colleges a surplus of veterinarians has developed in some areas. However, Shelton says, Texas A&M graduates are still in high demand, in part because of their specialty training.

"We've strengthened our clinical teaching programs a great deal," Shelton says. "We've brought in a resident and intern training program patterned somewhat after human medicine where young veterinarians do get some specialty training. At the same time, they contribute to the teaching program."

Shelton says veterinarians can no longer rely solely on a DVM degree. Instead, they must pursue additional training in fields such as toxicology, pathology, laboratory animal medicine, equine and food animal medicine.

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New facilities, in addition to curriculum changes such as the resident and intern training program, have improved the college, Shelton says.

The newest facility, the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, includes both the large and small animal clinics. It has the largest case load of any animal hospital in the United States with about 30,000 cases per year.

Twenty-two veterinarians are enrolled in intern and resident programs in the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, which functions like a giant laboratory for students in their third and fourth years of their professional education.

The College of Veterinary Medicine has 135 fulltime professors in tenure positions and about 60 non-tenure positions. Support personnel number more than 300, including clerical and technical positions.

The newest addition to the college, a joint project with the College of Medicine, is the Medical Sciences Library located across Farm Road 60. It will be connected by an underground tunnel.

"It's a good size medical library, and perhaps one day it will be the best medical science library in the state of Texas," Shelton says.

Improvements in the facilities at the college are encouraging students to apply, but the main reason more than 500 qualified students apply each year is the cost of tuition, says Shelton.

"Our tuition rates are very low, and when compared with other institutions it is embarrassingly low," he says. "For instance, our tuition and

building use fee are \$10 per student credit hour, and that's low when you look at schools like Cornell and Pennsylvania. At places like those, the tuition alone is running close to \$2,000 per year, and we're looking at one-tenth of that."

Today's college is a far cry from the one at the turn of the century when Texas was still wild and not that many people wanted to be veterinarians.

The College of Veterinary Medicine's history began in 1916. It sprang from a need to stop the spreading of Texas fever, a disease that was decimating livestock herds.

The Texas Legislature allocated \$100,000 for a veterinary college, so the construction of Francis Hall began. Dr. Mark Francis, the first dean of the college and the "father of veterinary medicine in Texas," is credited with convincing the legislature of the need for the college.

Francis taught the first classes there with only 13 students enrolled. In 1920 the first class graduated. It had four students.

Since that time the graduates of the college have set academic standards for the nation to follow. The curriculum at the college is constantly being up-graded, says Dr. Dean Gage, associate dean for academic affairs.

He says several academic policies, some which will not take effect until September 1985, are making the college tougher and better.

"Starting with the class of '83, the minimal passing academic standard is a 70 rather than a 60," Gage says.

"What we've done is dropped the D grade so it's A, B, C or F."

The academic calendar was switched back to four years, says Gage, because the students and the staff couldn't keep up a three-year pace.

"The accelerated curriculum was very stressful on the students," he says. "They had no breaks, no time off. It was very time consuming, and the amount of material covered was overwhelming."

Texas A&M veterinary graduates have been scoring well above the national average on the national board's examination for licensure despite the previously stressful curriculum, Gage says.

The most important change to take place, Gage says, will be the recently approved pre-professional curriculum. The change will add 17 undergraduate credit hours to current requirements. The added hours are classes in biochemistry, computer science, nutrition and entomology. The required credit hours will jump from 66 to 83.

This change will require the applicants to have at least three years of college credit, although most students enter with an average of four and a half years of pre-professional education.

In addition to teaching, many veterinarians are employed by federal, state, and local agencies to control or eliminate diseases in the animal industry.

In public health, the primary concern is to stop those diseases that can spread to man from becoming epidemic and to control those which can't be stopped.

Through the research at the veterinary college many diseases have been controlled and several modern human medical techniques have been developed.

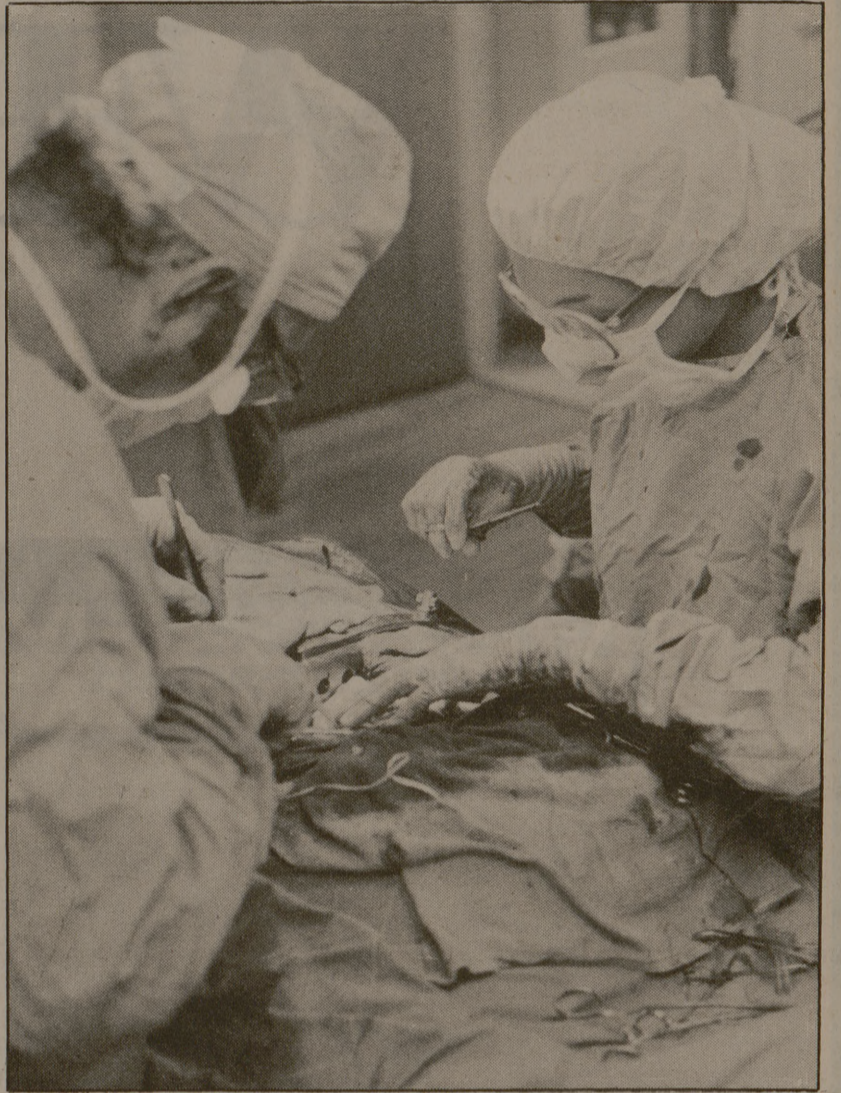


Photo by BRENT MOZINGO

Dr. D.R. Gross, professor and director of veterinary physiology, and Dr. Cynthia Snowdon insert an experimental valve into a goat's heart during open heart surgery. The valve may some day be used in humans.

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